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## Get into the heads of your customers



BY JIM CARROLL

I'm sitting here typing as I anxiously await a courier. I'm hugely excited. You see, my Creative Labs Nomad Jukebox is supposed to show up. It's a new walkman-like music device—nothing new there. Except that this one lets you listen to MP3 files, with the result that you can carry around with you about 130 hours worth of music.

It's a hot product, and the fact that I'm watching the door, just dying to get my hands on it, demonstrates that fact. Join the buzz on the Internet, and you'll find that scads of people are interested in it. It will sell well.

Of course, that's not the only new product that is exciting. Right now, I'd kill for a Kerbango ([www.kerbango.com](http://www.kerbango.com)) or an Audiotron ([www.audiotron.com](http://www.audiotron.com)). After all, I've converted the 1,000 CDs that I own into MP3 files, and have them stored on a big computer server in my basement. Since that machine is plugged into my home stereo, I've got a modern day electronic jukebox. These machines would let me do what I'm doing, but I could do it much better.

Now, you may or may not have heard of the Kerbango. But millions of people on the Internet have. And we all want one.

Think, for a moment, about my music system. I now have in place the ultimate, flexible music system of the

future. With my "jukebox," I can instantly load up hundreds of songs fit for any occasion. The Kerbango will provide a nice add-on to my system, since it will allow me to more easily access my tunes.

I've got flexibility today, but I do it through a PC. For example, when my wife is around, I can double click on the "OK stuff" icon on a computer somewhere in my home, and load up the politically correct music. You know, James Taylor, Carole King, Carly Simon. Non-threatening, nice, gentle baby-boomer stuff.

But as soon as she steps out the door, whoah! I double click the "Unacceptable" icon fire up the volume and relive my youth with my friends from Led Zeppelin, Deep Purple, Black Sabbath. In-a-gada-da-vida is only but a mousedown away.

In effect, I've got my own 10,000 song jukebox (all songs legally acquired and bought and paid for). I've already got the entertainment industry of the 21st century, and I want more. And the funny thing is, most folks in the entertainment industry don't realize that plenty of their customers are already here with me, and have left them behind in the dust, oblivious to the future.

All of which makes for a fascinating state of affairs. With the emergence of the Internet and the rapid rate of tech-

nology change, we are now in a situation in which plenty of companies in plenty of industries are completely missing the boat in terms of where their customers are. It's a big and widespread problem; I'm finding that in many industries, a lot of marketing executives don't have a clue as to the types of things that their customers are actually doing online, or how they might be using new technology. How can you hope to spin a marketing message, if you are that clueless? How can you hope to reach the customer, when the customer has gone somewhere else?

Sadly, it isn't surprising why this is coming about. Far too many executives, in trying to understand the digital future, pay attention to the headlines, and don't take the time to get beyond the flashy news story of the day to really understand what is going on. To understand your customers, you've got to get beyond the headlines and get into the minds of the people.

That's why what is happening within the music and entertainment industry provides such a fascinating case study of how an entire industry can miss the emergence of a new future.

Think about it—if you get your knowledge on world evolution through the news media, you will be convinced that MP3 is all about lawsuits and Napster and mp3.com and music theft.

Well, there certainly is a lot of entertainment coverage in the press as new business models are thrashed about, but that isn't what is really going on. Get into the online drumbeat, and you'll discover that an entire generation of technologically savvy people have decided that the CD is, well, retro. It's a 20th-century technology in a 21st-century world, and to many people like me, it's completely obsolete. Obviously the folks at Creative Labs, Kerbango and elsewhere agree with that assessment. But I certainly don't think that mainstream audio manufacturers do, nor do the music labels.

How can an entire industry miss such a significant evolution? It's happening now before our eyes, and leads to an important question to consider: In this age of technology and the Internet, are you missing the obvious future of your industry? Is it unfolding around you, as your customers change, yet you aren't really aware of the fact?

That's probably one of the most critical questions that you should be asking yourself today. In the meantime, I've got to go. My wife just walked in the door, and I've got to change the music!

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